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RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 0970
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 1694
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1116
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1286
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 4540
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USAID FOR AA/AFR AND AFR/EA
KAMPALA FOR USAID/FFPO
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SUBJECT: FOOD AID FOR ERITREA: A PENDING CRISIS WITHOUT A RESPONSE

CLASSIFIED BY: AMB Scott H. DeLisi, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

REFTEL: A) Asmara 201 B) Asmara 280

¶1. (C) With the ever growing humanitarian crisis in the Horn of Africa, concerns over Eritrea's food needs and the Government of the State of Eritrea's (GSE's) plans escalate. Reports from the various regions present a dire picture regarding food security and livestock health. Food remains undistributed and of the approximately 98,000 metric tons in warehouses 70% nears its shelf life. The unofficial results of the incomplete National Nutrition Survey conducted nearly two months ago show global malnutrition values of over 20% in some areas. The GSE's National Household Survey (to determine food needs and the ability to work) has been terminated, reportedly due to statistical problems and an alternate "registration" begun. The GSE also still appears determined to implement a Food for Work program, which would be problematic for some donors and NGOs. (Septel)

¶2. (C) Ambassador will meet WFP-Eritrea Director Cebron on April 12 and will urge him to draw together donors and UN agencies to discuss next steps with GSE and a strategy to respond to humanitarian concerns in Eritrea. We know that several donors are already examining the issue individually

and pondering next steps but coordination among donors is a critical missing component. The UN is planning for a late April visit of UN Special Humanitarian Envoy for the Horn of Africa, former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik. According to the UN FAO representative, the agenda for his planned visit has not yet been set, including at what level he hopes to meet with GSE officials. Last week the Dutch mission sent a notice to The Hague regarding food security, presenting in more detail the situation here and inquiring about Dutch thinking and plans. A recent visit to Eritrea by DFID staff also examined food security, however, any additional British support for food aid would be targeted and most likely focused on supplemental feeding. The German mission continues to inform Berlin of the growing problem here yet has no immediate plans to take action.

13. (C) Humanitarian Aid partners, such as UNFAO, UNWFP, Mercy Corps and Catholic Relief Services, express great worry over the situation in the different regions, offering anecdotes that paint a dire picture of the situation - 80,000 livestock dead, the livestock market withering away (a common occurrence in times of food stress), empty therapeutic feeding centers because there is only food for the infants and not enough for the caregivers, schools closing early as they can not feed the students, and traders unable to procure grains. Efforts to get an accurate picture are complicated by a marked unwillingness in communities to talk candidly about food shortages or government failings. WFP recently began thinking about options for the donor-provided food already in-country, considering transferring the food out of Eritrea or using it for in-patient hospital feeding rather than allowing it

to rot while awaiting GSE agreement to resume general distributions. The NGOs, meanwhile want to act but feel subject to the mercurial whims of the GSE and to donors' commitments and political concerns. Meanwhile, the cry for help from the population, if not from the government, is getting louder.

14. (C) Comment: Eritrea's pending food crisis is different from the rest of the Horn of Africa only in that the GSE refuses to fully acknowledge the problem or engage the international community in an effort to address it. An unyielding determination to be self-reliant and avoid dependence on donors (who Eritrea views almost universally with suspicion) will not change the fact that Eritrea will face a severe food security crisis and will need food. The GSE's lack of engagement with the international partners, including the World Food Program, and its seven-month long suspension of general distribution of food already in country raises serious questions about GSE thinking and intentions.

15. (C) Comment continued: Meanwhile, GSE sensitivities about others telling it how to care for the people of Eritrea are acute and the visit of the Special Envoy may - for the GSE - bring unwelcome international attention to the food security issues in the country. The GSE may interpret a high profile and well publicized visit as an attempt to back them into a corner, a position that usually results in the GSE to digging in its heels. Such a publicized visit may provide "cover" for the donors and the UN, however, as we seek to get food moving again. Post will continue to explore options with WFP but proposals to transfer food out of Eritrea will require careful consideration and may be non-starters given GSE control of warehouses, trucks, ports, etc. Post will also urge the UN agencies here to take a stronger leadership role, with support of the donors, in pressing the GSE for more constructive engagement and for a food aid plan. End Comment.

DeLisi